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# Increasing Agricultural Community Involvement in Regional Conservation Planning

*Lessons from Landowners, Non-profit Organizations, Local Governments and Agency Staff*

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Prepared for  
The California Department of Fish and Game

January 2004

## **Executive Summary**

Agricultural landowner involvement in regional open space and habitat conservation plans, such as California's Natural Community Conservation Plans (NCCPs) or federal Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs), has been minimal or resistant. For conservation plans on a landscape scale to be accomplished in counties with a strong agricultural presence, it is necessary to understand the agricultural community's concerns and apprehensions regarding such plans.

The opinions and perspectives of the agricultural community regarding habitat and species conservation are as diverse as the products they grow. This diversity has made it difficult so far to offer incentives that would bring the entire agricultural community to the table and keep them participating for the long term. While diverse in opinions and perspectives, the agricultural community seems to have a common set of concerns regarding regional conservation planning.

A total of 49 in depth interviews were conducted with agricultural organizations, agency staff and individual landowners in Yolo, Solano, and Placer Counties in California. These interviews provided insights regarding barriers to the agricultural community's engagement in regional conservation plans. The major barriers to participation identified in this study are mistrust of government, miscommunication, restrictions on land use, impact on land values and lack of incentives to participate.

Though the identification of barriers to participation is important, the primary focus of this study was to identify potential solutions to those barriers. Organizations and landowners gave their perspectives on what could be done to overcome the barriers. Their ideas include improving outreach to the agricultural community through partnership building and education, emphasizing commonalities among agencies, plan participants and the agricultural community, creating incentives to participate, and celebrating successes.

The findings presented here are intended to highlight areas for improvement, rather than emphasize past mistakes. The California Department of Fish and Game's willingness to sponsor this study is an indication of its commitment to collaborations aimed at successful habitat and species conservation. The information provided is intended to be used by conservation planners, agency staff, plan representatives and participants, and the agricultural community to initiate and foster relationships that focus on shared goals and cooperation. In the future, conservation planners will likely find their strongest allies in the agricultural community.